Chapter 2: Natural History and Cultural Context

Introduction

To better understand the role of Skinner Butte Park in both past and present human culture, it is helpful to get a sense of the formative processes that created the landscape we see today. A short bibilography is included at the end of the Master Plan for further reading.

Geography

Eugene lies at the southern terminus of the Willamette Valley, where the Coast Range and the Cascade Range merge in a series of forested foothills. These hills surround the Eugene area to the south, east and west, and include landmarks such as Spencer Butte, College Hill, and the ridgeline. Much of the land in and around Eugene is generally characterized by flat, alluvial plains punctuated by volcanic hills rising no more than a few hundred feet above the valley floor.

Skinner Butte is one such volcanic hill, which lies in an approximate north-south line formed by two other basalt-core hills: Spencer Butte to the south and Gillespie Butte to the north. The summit of Skinner Butte lies approximately 682 feet above sea level (see Map 3: Topography). The summit is elongated, running in a roughly east-west direction, and includes a small, perhaps artificially enhanced, bench to the east of the summit and about fifty feet lower. Skinner Butte and some other nearby hills were formed when magma pushed upward through the earth's crust and cooled very slowly, creating the regular, polygonal stone formations commonly known as "columnar basalt". The columnar basalt at the core of Skinner Butte was quarried towards the end of the 19th century and used throughout the region for everything from building foundations to grave markers. The old quarry is now a popular public rock climbing area.

Aside from Skinner Butte, the Willamette River is certainly the most dominant geographic feature in the park. One of the largest rivers in the Pacific Northwest, the Willamette flows through Eugene in a roughly west by northwesterly direction. The geomorphology of the river is characterized in the Willamette Valley by dramatic floods, which have historically led to continual shifting and change in the river channel and banks. It was common for the river to shift its course dramatically, carving new channels and abandoning old ones.

Workers in the Skinner Butte quarry c. 1908

Skinner Butte Park lies along the southern bank of the Willamette River. Several river terraces are evidence of flooding activity of varying frequency. The lower and mid terraces flood on a more frequent cycle than the upper terrace or "main terrace", where the majority of park improvements such as the playground, restrooms, Campbell Senior Center, etc. are now located. Contemporary development and human activity has dramatically changed the character and hydrology of the Willamette River (see Chapter 4).

Soils in Skinner Butte Park range from deep, well-drained alluvium (Chapman and Malabon-Urban land complex) to relatively thin and rocky soils derived from the basaltic core of Skinner Butte. Many soils in the park have been changed and disturbed by human activities.

Flora and Fauna

The plants and animals living in and around Skinner Butte Park have changed dramatically over the past 150 years or so. Some have disappeared, and others are thriving. It is part of the legacy of Euro-American settlement and urban development that will be an important interpretive theme for the park. It is a theme dominated by change, and how continually shifting cultural attitudes affect the landscape. The following description helps to provide a basic frame for the scope of that change, from its probable condition prior to Euro-American settlement to a modern, urban park.

When the Grizzly Bear Roamed

Because of the diversity of habitats found there, Skinner Butte Park was home to a rich variety of plants and animals. Although a future habitat management study will develop a much more complete list of plants and animals found there today (see Chapter 6, Implementation Plan), it is helpful to get an overview of what one might have seen before the time of Euro-American settlement.

The landscape around Skinner Butte Park was once very different. According to federal surveys carried out in the 1850s, much of the Willamette Valley landscape was a vast and open grassland, extending south into the foothills and sweeping northward to the banks of the Columbia River (see Figure 1). The springtime brought a tide of purple to the prairie as the native camas bloomed, giving way to the golden yellow of tarweed, or native sunflower, in the later summer. Oregon white oak punctuated the grassland, where single trees or small groves had grown large enough to resist the effects of regular fires set by the Kalapuya natives (see "The Kalapuya," this chapter). Ash groves spread out over low-lying, seasonally flooded areas, and the continually shifting channels of the Willamette River and its tributaries were marked by a broad band of towering cottonwood, alder, bigleaf maple, willow and others in diverse stages of succession.

Skinner Butte and the Willamette River are the dominant geographic features of the park

Skinner Butte rose above the Willamette River where the sweeping prairie spilled over the high south bank. Several tough, drought-resistant oaks grew here and there on the thin soil on its ridges and summit, with perhaps a handful of Douglas fir on the north side of the butte. Patches of wild

Evidence of beavers can still be found in Skinner Butte Park, like this beaver-gnawed tree

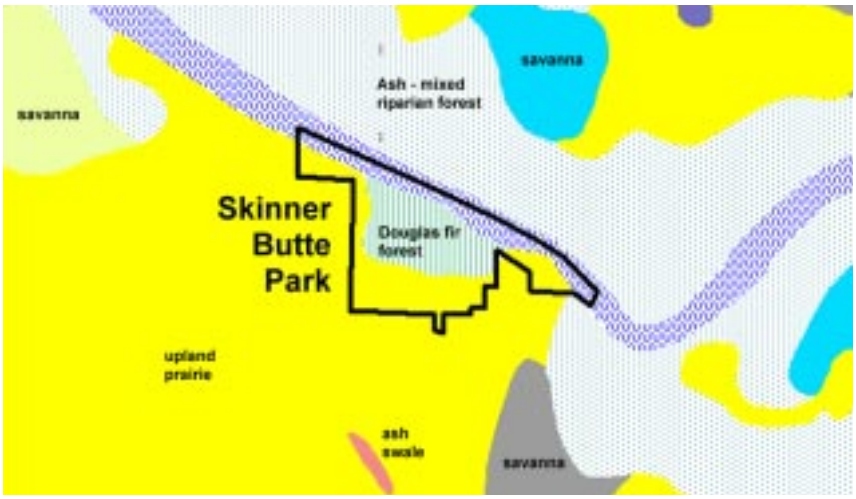

Figure 1: Historic Vegetation Patterns
This diagram, derived from federal land surveys c. 1850, shows vegetation types around Skinner Butte Park

rose, poison oak and other drought-tolerant shrubs grew among the grasses and wildflowers of the butte and its gently sloping flanks.

Along the Willamette, mammoth cottonwoods, alder and bigleaf maple shaded the river terraces where snowberry, dogwood and herbaceous perennials flowered in the wet spring months. The upper banks of the river, high enough to be flooded only very rarely, may have also been dotted with a few Oregon white oak, mixed with the occasional bigleaf maple and Douglas fir. The low banks were a series of wandering gravel bars, islands, channels and sloughs, sprouting with willows, alder and cottonwood in all stages of succession. In some places, the river and its network of gravelly braids may have regularly wandered over an area up to a mile wide.

Regular fires created the open prairie landscape that dominated the area prior to 1850

The area that today is Skinner Butte Park was likely part of a rich landscape with abundant wildlife. Before settlers arrived, black bear and grizzly bear roamed the mountain slopes and prairies, foraging on berries and occasionally taking the young or weak of the abundant blacktail deer. Coyote and fox hunted the forest edges and brush patches for cottontail rabbits, field mice and other small mammals. The skies were patrolled by great raptors like the golden eagle, red-tailed hawk and many others. Elk herds migrated back and forth between the mountains and the lowland meadows, following the greenest pastures of the season.

Never far away, the mighty Willamette flowed past them all. Beavers dammed its tributaries or built their dens on the shifting backwaters of the main river, sharing the waters and river edge with other mammals such as otter, muskrat, mink, and raccoon. Osprey and bald eagles rode the warm updrafts from Skinner Butte, soaring over the river waters in search of native cutthroat trout, pike-minnow or pea-mouth. Seasonal migrations of salmon and steelhead filed past the butte on their way to the ocean, or returning to the gravel beds of their conception.

When the Burning Stopped

Although fur trappers visited the area decades earlier, the era of Euro-American settlers was heralded by the arrival of Eugene and Mary Skinner in 1846 (see "Euro-American Settlement," this chapter). This closed the book on thousands of years of gradual evolution of ecological interrelationships, and opened a new chapter of unprecedented change for the plant and animal species of the area.

Most dramatically, even before the Skinner's arrival, the fires of the Kalapuya had mostly stopped (see "The Kalapuya," this chapter), and the landscape had begun to change. As settlers claimed the land in the upper Willamette valley, the remaining survivors of the Kalapuya people were "resettled" to reservations, and the fires they used as a tool to manage the land stopped altogether. Although the irregular cycle of burning used by the Kalapuya is arguably not a natural phenomenon, it had nevertheless, over several thousand years, brought about a unique and diverse ecosystem dependent upon that cycle. When the burning stopped, the days were numbered for the broad grasslands and scattered oaks of the Willamette Valley.

Since natural, lightning-strike fires are rare in the landscape of the Willamette Valley and western Oregon, there are few natural forces, other than flooding and erosion, that maintain an open landscape. Without burning, other taller and faster growing trees such as Douglas fir and bigleaf maple quickly grow up and shade out the more

fire and drought-resistant oak trees. Within just a few generations, savanna-prairie is transformed into a temperate, mixed conifer and hardwood forest. Plant communities, and the creatures that depend upon them, disappear and give way to a new set of interrelationships that are adapted to the changing conditions.

This process had already begun by the time the Skinners arrived. In the first half of the 19th century, the culture of the Kalapuya was already a shadow of what it once was. The fires had decreased in frequency. The planning and execution of fire management, once highly organized and sub-divided among the various tribal bands, had become increasingly erratic. Nevertheless, reports of early settlers describe the area as open meadows and fields that reminded them of cultivated wheat.

The pattern of open prairie was probably maintained to some extent throughout the settlement period by several factors, including removal of existing tree stands for fuel and construction, agriculture and grazing. The slopes of Skinner Butte were reportedly grazed by cattle and sheep in the latter half of the 19th century. This presumably kept the character of the south, east and west slopes similar to the time of the Skinners' arrival. The north side of the butte, however, being more conducive to the germination of Douglas fir seedlings (more shade, moisture and deeper soils), had long since begun to develop into an early successional fir forest.

Also during this period, the wildlife of the area was impacted by the habits and survival needs of Euro-American settlers. Grizzly bears and wolves, among the most feared and aggressively pursued of the large predators, disappeared from the Willamette Valley and continually retreated to more remote areas. A strong fur trade saw a significant reduction in numbers of small mammals such as coyote, fox, beaver and muskrat. Large birds of prey also began to decline as more settlers arrived. The habits and patterns of many other species of animals were changed irrevocably through new patterns of land use, including grazing, agriculture, streets, and eventually industry and urban development.

The Other Immigrants

Euro-American settlers found that many of their favorite plants brought from other parts of the world, including food crops and ornamental plants, thrived in the fertile soil and favorable climate of the Willamette Valley, with mild winters, high rainfall and cool summers. Collectors and enthusiasts brought with them hundreds of new plant species for their gardens. Many other species were introduced accidentally, as plants drifted in literally on the heels of the newly arrived. Some of these plants naturalized (began to reproduce on their own in the wild), and in the blink of an evolutionary eye, the landscape began to look very different.

The landscape changed dramatically with the arrival of invasive plant species

The most successful of these new species, those that were able to reproduce so quickly and vigorously that they began to take over large areas and crowd out the native plants, are known as "invasive" species. Many invasive species dominate Skinner Butte Park today, including Himalayan blackberry, Scotch broom, English ivy, Norway maple, English

Invasive species such as this English laurel are destroying habitats in Skinner Butte Park

hawthorn, and many others (see Chapter 6, Habitat Management Plan). Coupled with the removal of fire as a management tool, these invasive species have dramatically reduced habitat diversity in the park, creating monocultures (where one kind of plant dominates) that smother the diverse communities of native plants that would otherwise be growing there.

Cultural Preferences

Cultural attitudes about plants and landscape aesthetics are constantly changing

Cultural habits and attitudes also played a strong role in the changing landscape, particularly on Skinner Butte. Towards the end of the settlement era, closing out the 19th century and entering into the 20th century, the practices of grazing on the butte eventually gave way to industry, municipal utilities and urban development as the Eugene grew up around the park (see "Euro-American Settlement," this chapter). The cultural aesthetic of the time favored ornamental trees, and people began to feel that the butte would look better decorated with a few trees. For example, a grove of incense cedar was planted around the home of Dr. Shelton in the 1880s. This grove has since spread to cover a large portion of the lower and middle south slope of the butte. Several municipal tree planting efforts also took place, including a 1934 Veteran's Day tree planting ceremony.

These planting efforts merely accelerated what natural succession would have done anyway: transformed the butte from part of a vast savanna-prairie to an island of emerging forest. After the fires and grazing stopped, the invasive species arrived, and tree planting began, many areas of Skinner Butte are now dense, wooded and brushy. Only a few, rapidly disappearing remnants of savanna-prairie on the east and west slopes (see Map 4: Existing Vegetation).

Endangered Habitat

As we see it today, Skinner Butte Park is unrecognizable from its condition prior to Euro-American settlement. The forested hill surrounded by a sea of buildings and homes bears little resemblance to the gently sloping, grassy knoll that stood relatively unchanged for thousands of years.

The Oregon white oak savanna-prairie, a once vast and abundant habitat type indigenous to the Willamette Valley, is now nearly extinct. Less than one percent remains. Some of the animal species that depend upon savanna-prairie are also gone, or nearly gone, from the valley, and are not likely to return given the fragmented state of the remaining habitat. However, although it has been radically altered over the past 150 or so years, the park remains a showcase for plant communities and successional trends that are common to the Willamette Valley. It is a similar story that is happening everywhere, in the Willamette Valley and around the world. The presence of this resource in the center of Eugene is particularly unique and valuable as a tool for teaching the story of local plant and animal communities, how they fit in with human culture, and how they are both changing.

Birds

It is worth pointing out that the butte, as both bird habitat and a recreational resource for birding, is still extremely valuable despite enormous development and change. Skinner Butte and its unique geography are exceptionally attractive to migratory birds. Despite changes in vegetation, or perhaps in some cases because of them, Skinner Butte has become a regional magnet for birds and birders alike. It is located in the flight path of many species of migratory birds traveling through the Willamette Valley corridor. The shape and size of the butte, and its isolated

Skinner Butte is an excellent place to view a diversity of bird species, including migratory birds and large resident birds such as the great horned owl (Bubo virginianus)

location near the south end of the valley, seems to attract birds traveling northward in the spring to stop, rest and forage before continuing their journey. Many of the larger, deciduous trees on the south, southwest and west summit area, and along the entire northern crest of the summit, are especially favored by migrating birds and the birders seeking them out (see Chapter 5, Habitat Management Plan for further discussion and recommendations). The park is also home to many uncommon and interesting resident bird species such as osprey and great horned owl.

The Kalapuya

The story of the Kalapuya, the native inhabitants of the southern Willamette Valley, is both sad and compelling, and has been widely misunderstood for most of contemporary history. It is a story that has been pieced together over decades through scattered bits of information and memory. As anthropologists broaden their understanding, the official story that is unfolding begins to sound more like the story told by the modern descendants of the Kalapuya themselves: of a great culture in a land of abundance.

A Vanished Civilization

It is estimated that there were somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 Kalapuya living in and around the Willamette Valley in the year 1770 (Boyd 1990). By the time Eugene and Mary Skinner arrived in 1846, less than 70 years later, there were estimated to be fewer than 600 Kalapuya remaining. This represents over 95% mortality of a once thriving culture in a very short time (Connolly 1999). These numbers do not begin to describe the devastating epidemics of disease, including small pox, malaria and measles, that swept through the northwest, and lingered tenaciously in the Willamette Valley, between 1770 and 1840. Testimonials and a few scattered records from trapping expeditions and missionaries in the early 1800s describe the loss of entire villages in one season. They recount incredible suffering, and the flight of survivors from village sites to escape the infection.

This 1841 sketch by A. T. Agate of the Us Exploring Expedition shows the artist's interpretation of a Kalapuya man.

The result of this devastation, wrought so quickly and so thoroughly, was "a complete breakdown in social structures, communities, and traditional modes of behavior, and the imposition of a demoralizing hopelessness on the survivors" (Connolly 1999). Through the desertion of settlements and the re-grouping of survivors in other places, there was little left of the once great network of Kalapuya tribes and clans that shared the valley. Not only were there very few left who could remember or recount the life of the Kalapuya before 1770, but during this period of catastrophic decline, there is no written record of the Kalapuya people. Later historical accounts from early settlers often describe the native inhabitants of the valley as sickly and wretched. The Willamette Valley had also been perennially dubbed "The Valley of Sickness." But this was not the way things had been over the previous millennia. This does not describe the real Kalapuya culture. What the first Euro-American settlers saw, therefore, was only the aftermath.

Disease had claimed about 95% of the Kalapuya people by the time Euro-American settlers arrived in the area

The Kalapuya culture has long been mysterious and misunderstood

Prior to the epidemics, the Kalapuya culture was large, complex and becoming an agricultural society

In the 1850s, the Bureau of Indian Affairs "resettled" the remaining Kalapuya to the Grand Ronde Reservation, along with other western Oregon tribal groups, near the present-day town of Willamina. Their ancestral lands were officially placed in the public domain for settlement through the Donation Land Claims program. They were not compensated. Despite resistance to government treaties and resettlement in other areas, as exemplified by the Rogue Indian War in southern Oregon, the Kalapuya did not resist. Evidence suggests that their culture was, by this time, too scattered, and the Willamette Valley already too densely populated by Euro-American settlers.

It was not until after this period of relocation to reservations that early ethnographers, for the first time, began transcribing oral histories from the Kalapuya themselves. Most of the information that exists from the Kalapuya comes from interviews during this period, and from the inherited oral tradition that the Kalapuya descendants carry with them.

It is little wonder, then, that even the most open-minded and searching of ethnographers have been challenged to piece together this mystery: what were the Kalapuya really like? To answer that question, the bits and pieces of information that do exist need to be carefully examined and continually reinterpreted.

Modern research methods allow an increasingly accurate glimpse into the climate and plant communities over thousands of years, shedding light on the conditions under which the inhabitants of the Willamette Valley lived. Archaeological techniques are also improving, and traditional biases and filters for their interpretation are slowly falling away to be replaced by new, more accurate analyses. Most importantly, the history of the Kalapuya, as it is told by the Kalapuya themselves, is more becoming more readily accepted than it once was. Through all of these methods, a picture of a lost culture is beginning to form.

The camas lily was an important staple food for the Kalapuya

The Golden Age

Radiocarbon dating has indicated that the Willamette Valley's first human inhabitants probably arrived some 12,000 years ago. For several thousand years, small family bands roamed about a sparsely populated landscape, hunting and collecting wild foods where they were most readily available, and moving on to other areas when the food was depleted.

As the population of the valley eventually increased, the archaeological record shows that the pattern shifted to a more stabilized lifestyle. About 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, evidence suggests the construction of more permanent settlements, including the "construction of substantial houses, and the intensive harvest of certain abundant foods (such as salmon)" (Connolly 1999), as well as the storage of food. Since the salmon population in the upper Willamette River was never great enough to serve as a main food staple, the inhabitants of the Willamette River began to intensively harvest and process camas, a highly nutritious bulb growing abundantly in moist prairie areas of the valley floor. Several other species of plant growing on the prairies, such as varieties of native sunflower (or tarweed), were also harvested at least as intensively as camas as a food staple.

Around 3,500 to 4,000 years ago, the inhabitants of the Willamette Valley probably began to take on a more settled life similar to what it must have been like just prior to the introduction of disease in 1770. This probably represents the Kalapuya as they were described by descendants on the Grande Ronde Indian Reservation and recorded in the 1850s by early ethnographers.

The Kalapuya had begun to settle into a broad assemblage of ethnically related communities or bands, each with its own cluster of separate villages, and each typically speaking a separate dialect of the Kalapuya language. Each band shared certain resources, such as big game, within a well-defined territory. The boundaries for

these territories were, by all accounts, highly restricted with respect to the resource, but open for legitimate purposes such as trade. Other resources, such as fields of camas and tarweed, were controlled by specific villages, and plots within these fields belonged to specific individuals within the village.

One of the hallmarks of this final chapter of the Kalapuya culture, as with other cultures in Pacific coast valleys, was the use of fire to manage the landscape. Managed fire was an important discovery that held many benefits for the Kalapuya. First and foremost, it maintained the open prairie landscape favored by camas and native sunflower, their primary food sources. Burning eliminated the competition of trees, shrubs and other grasses that would eventually replace the natural meadows of food crops, and improved growing conditions for a host of other secondary food plants, such as Oregon white oak, hazelnut and huckleberry. Fire also created an open, park-like landscape that greatly enhanced mobility and the pursuit of game such as deer and elk, while at the same time concentrating them in the unburned stands of forest where they were easier to locate.

It has been said that the modern Kalapuya had become horticulturalists more so than hunter-gatherers. Probably they were both. But the evidence is clear that they intensively managed the landscape to produce what is understood to be a reliable source of food that supported, and was supported by, a highly organized and successful society. To some descriptions, the Kalapuya lifestyle would have been one of abundance, in a valley tailored by their own ingenuity to suit their needs.

In the warm months, the Kalapuya typically moved about the valley floor, setting up open camps in different areas as food sources became most abundant. This season was marked by the harvest and preparation of their staple foods such as camas, sunflower, acorns, tubers, fruits and berries, as well as with hunting and fishing. When the weather was favorable for travel, goods were traded with other bands of Kalapuya, as well as with other tribal groups from the coast to the Columbia. Many of these footpaths became the basis for many pack trails and wagon trails used by settlers, and eventually for roads that are still in use today.

Wintertime brought the Kalapuya together in permanent settlements, characterized by groups of "pit houses", or semi-subterranean, earth-walled buildings with bark roofs and central fire places. Several families often shared the larger houses. During the short, cold days and long nights, family groups and villages gathered for a time of storytelling. These stories were not only a form of entertainment, they were the most important vessel for passing knowledge, beliefs and morals of the Kalapuya culture from one generation to the next.

This rich oral tradition is anchored in the landscape of the Willamette Valley. Some Kalapuya stories, passed from one generation to the next in a very prescribed and precise manner, are still told today, and represent the truth for the contemporary Kalapuya descendants. Local features such as the Willamette River and Skinner Butte play central roles in their oral heritage.

The Kalapuya have a rich oral tradition anchored in the Willamette Valley landscape, including Skinner Butte.

The Kalapuya and Skinner Butte Park

Although evidence is particularly sparse for the traditions of the Kalapuya bands living in the southern Willamette Valley, Skinner Butte was reportedly used for certain ceremonial purposes. Historical references indicate the presence of a "stone ring" near the summit of the butte that was destroyed by the construction of the second reservoir in 1906 (see "A Brief History of Skinner Butte Park"). The purpose and timing of these ceremonies is unknown.

What is more certain, however, is that the Kalapuya used the butte for the same reason many people use it today: as a lookout. From the summit of Skinner Butte, one could survey the local landscape, from views of the Three Sisters to the coast range, and from Spencer Butte to Mt. Hood on a clear day. Keeping in mind that the

This rare photograph reportedly depicts a mat-covered Kalapuya summer house

atmosphere in the valley some 200 years ago was, by and large, much more clear than it is today, we can only surmise that this must have been a spectacular vista. From the butte, situated between the river and the Amazon flood plain, early inhabitants were probably also able to track the movements of wildlife through the local landscape, or the movements of other people.

The cultural use of Skinner Butte, therefore, is literally thousands of years old. Although dramatically altered, the views of the surrounding landscape enjoyed by park visitors today are pre-historic in their significance, and offer a perspective from which to view the changing landscape.

Looking Forward

The legacy of the Kalapuya is complex. It is a colossal tragedy, and it is a source of inspiration. It helps us understand the land we live in much more deeply, and it helps us see more clearly where we are going. The fate of the Kalapuya, as with countless other Native American cultures in North America and elsewhere, is inextricably connected to the culture that consumed them. In the case of some Willamette Valley settlers, the Kalapuya were their friends, and often their lifeline. Relations during this contact period were predominantly peaceful. Indeed, there are friendships between settler families and Kalapuya families that are still strong today, where the descendants of both still live near one another on the lands of their ancestors.

Skinner Butte Park can play a role in sharing the story of the Kalapuya with the community

Both the Kalapuya and Euro-American settlers had one goal in common: to survive, and to persevere. And, indeed, both have done so.

As a metropolitan park at the center of our community, it is fitting that Skinner Butte Park play a role in beginning to interpret and share that legacy. A wish has been expressed by members of the community that this legacy be one of clear understanding about what happened to the Kalapuya people, but more importantly one of mutual survival, understanding, and looking towards the future.

Euro-American Settlement

The First Explorers

The very earliest of Euro-American explorers arrived along the Pacific Northwest coast in the mid and late 1500s in search of the mythic northwest passage. The area remained largely uncharted, however, until Captain Cook landed at present-day British Columbia, where he developed a rich fur trade with the native inhabitants. This discovery brought many more traders and explorers from several European countries, and between the late 1700s and the early 1800s, at least 443 expeditions had landed on Pacific Northwest shores.

Other explorers searched for the northwest passage overland. The first was Alexander McKenzie in 1793, followed by the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804. Lewis and Clark knew about the Willamette Valley, but never ventured into its vast prairies during their voyage down the Columbia.

Fur trappers from trading outposts at present-day Astoria were probably the first explorers to wander into the Willamette Valley. Around 1812, several larger expeditions traveled as far as the East-Fork Willamette River (now the McKenzie River), and brought news of broad plains, open woodlands and fertile soil that quickly spread to would-be pioneers from the

eastern United States. By the 1840's, the Oregon Territory had begun to open up to immigrants following the Oregon Trail and seeking to settle the fertile lands.

In 1846, Eugene Skinner arrived from California with a small group of immigrants that became the first to establish a permanent settlement in the upper Willamette Valley. Skinner staked a 640-acre Donation Land Claim in the area around Skinner Butte Park, and built his first cabin in the fall of 1846 on the western slope of Skinner Butte. A marker commemorates the location of the cabin near First Avenue and Lincoln Street. The actual location of the original cabin, however, is still subject to debate and investigation.

For the settlers, the first winters were extremely difficult. Arriving in the fall, they were forced to live off provisions until crops could be planted and harvested at the end of the next season. Letters and reports tell of hardship and hunger, and mutual dependence to make it through the cold and wet winter. Other references are made to the friendliness and support of the Kalapuya living in the area.

The Applegate Trail

Also in 1846, two brothers, Jesse and Lindsay Applegate, began their quest to establish a safe overland wagon route to the Willamette Valley. At the time, the Oregon trail included a treacherous water route along the Columbia River for those seeking to reach the Willammette Valley, and many lives were lost along this treacherous section of the trail. The Applegate brothers had themselves each lost a child in a rafting accident and vowed to spare other families this same grief.

The new southern route of the Oregon Trail became known as the Applegate Trail. Branching off the Oregon Trail at Fort Hall, Idaho, the trail dipped south into the deserts of Nevada, and crossed through the Rogue Valley before approximately following the present-day route of I-5 into the Willamette Valley. Almost immediately, thousands of settlers began their journey on the new trail. Historical references indicated that the Applegate Trail passed just to the north of Skinner Butte, along what is now Cheshire Avenue. Today, the Applegate Trail Committee is an active and important advocate of history and historic interpretation in Skinner Butte Park.

Eugene Skinner, the first settler in the area, staked his claim around what is now Skinner Butte Park

A Town is Born

Mary Skinner and daughter, Mary Elizabeth, joined Eugene in 1847. By the summer of 1847, many more settlers began arriving on the Applegate Trail. As other early settlers staked claims in and around the region, Skinner opened up a trading post out of his cabin, and eventually began operating a ferry near the present-day location of the Ferry Street Bridge. Skinner's Post Office was authorized in 1850, and the settlement was officially designated with the same name.

The following year, Eugene Skinner and Judge Risdon set up meridians to plan a new town. Reports indicate that they stood on the summit of Skinner Butte, marking the line from Skinner Butte to the summit of Spencer Butte as the north-south axis of the town, and the line from the western summit of Skinner Butte due west as the

The entire structure of the city is based on geometry with Skinner Butte at its center

east-west axis. Today, these meridians are marked respectively by Willamette Street and First Avenue. Mary Skinner dubbed the new town "Eugene City".

Throughout the latter half of the 19th century, the increasing population in and around Eugene was predominantly concerned with agriculture, and for a brief time, limited grazing and cattle ranching. Beyond early subsistence farming for such crops as vegetables and oats, some of the first commercial crops included wheat and hops. Eventually, the development of the millrace laid the foundation for industry in Eugene City, including grist mills and eventually woolen mills. Other industries not dependent upon the millrace included a whiskey distillery, furniture manufacturing, quarries and brick yards.

A Brief History of Skinner Butte Park

Skinner Butte Park started off as an investment in public infrastructure

The Functional Butte

Around 1880, most of Skinner Butte and the surrounding property was purchased by Dr. T.W. Shelton, who was subsequently granted the first water franchise by the City of Eugene. Shelton and his associates' new company, known as the Eugene Water Company (EWC), built a 300,000 gallon concrete and masonry reservoir on the eastern summit of Skinner Butte in 1886. Reports indicate that a great deal of infrastructure, such as pipes and a rough access road to the summit, were constructed as part of this undertaking.

This picture shows the flood of February 4, 1890, from the east summit of Skinner Butte. Note the Ferry Street Bridge and the 1886 reservoir in the foreground.

Shortly thereafter, between 1887 and 1888, Shelton commissioned the construction of his new mansion at the southern foot of Skinner Butte. His home is known today as the Shelton-McMurphey-Johnson House, and remains one of the most noteworthy historic homes in the area. In that same year, Shelton sold a half-acre of land to the University of Oregon for the construction of an observatory. In a very short period of time, therefore, Skinner Butte was transformed from a pastoral hill to the site of significant municipal, institutional and private construction.

Other enterprises contributed to this trend. In the early 1890s, the columnar basalt outcropping near the southwestern toe of the butte became a popular quarry site. Stone from this site was used frequently in early construction around Eugene - such as foundations and steps - until the quarry was abandoned sometime around the early 1930s.

As other homes were built around the eastern foot of the butte, for example the Ankeny House in 1896, the University of Oregon observatory was already beginning to outlive its purpose. The university soon discovered the drawbacks to an observatory located in the valley floor of western Oregon. Visibility proved to be very poor for most of the year due to cloud cover, fog, or smoke and haze settling in the valley. By 1897, the observatory was abandoned. The building was itself an interesting piece of architecture from a contemporary perspective, but as it fell into disrepair over the ensuing years, it was finally blasted from the hilltop with dynamite around 1905. A police communications tower stands today in the same location.

Around 1905, the Willamette Valley Company purchased the reservoir from Dr. Shelton and Associates. There was a subsequent push for public control of the

This early print shows an artist's conception of Eugene growing up around Skinner Butte Park

municipal water system that inevitably failed. Another larger, one million gallon reservoir was constructed on the butte the following year on the western summit of the butte. This reservoir, a monolith of concrete requiring train loads of materials to construct walls eight feet thick at the base, would endure well into the latter half of the century.

The Transition to Public Ownership

It took an epidemic to tip the scales of public opinion. In 1906, contaminated water in the municipal water system caused an outbreak of typhoid fever in Eugene. The State Board of Health reportedly described it as " the worst typhoid epidemic in the history of Oregon." The people rallied around a bid for public ownership of the water system, and in 1908, Eugene voters passed a bond to buy out the Willamette Valley Company, creating in its place the Eugene Water Board (EWB). EWB, precursor of today's Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB), promised better service and a cleaner system.

Along with the purchase of the municipal water system infrastructure, including both reservoirs, EWB also became the new owner of the surrounding land. Skinner Butte was now public property. EWB, however, had no use for the entire property, and in 1914 recommended the dedication of about 67 acres as a public park. The voters embraced the proposal and approved a $93,000 bond levy to take over the "non-operating" land. To dedicate the park, the city celebrated in a grand festival of fireworks and dancing. Thus, Skinner Butte Park was created.

Skinner Butte Park was dedicated on July 6, 1914

The Heyday

In the following years, Skinner Butte Park experienced tremendous attention and popularity. This was a period of improvement and expansion, when the park enjoyed a particular distinction as the hub of local recreation and cultural activities, from car camping to festivals to the local swimming hole.

Several generations after the fires of the Kalapuya stopped, brush and poison oak had begun to grow densely across the flanks of the butte. This did not appeal to the aesthetics of the time, and crews were mustered by the newly formed Park Board

The car camp, shown here across Cheshire Avenue (formerly a section of the Applegate Trail), enjoyed great popularity in 1920's. Note the comfort station now known as Lamb Cottage in the background.

Hiking trails, such as this one photographed around 1915, have always been popular on Skinner Butte

to clear brush and begin planting trees in beautification efforts. Reports indicate that hoses were run from the reservoirs to nurse the new trees through the dry months on the thin soils of the butte, and that blasting was done to make room for the trees in the shallow, basalt bedrock.

These beautification efforts, however, were not the only activity on the butte during this time. Even before the park's dedication, the University of Oregon erected a large, wooden "O" just below the current overlook area. This was one of the first such collegiate letters to be erected in the country, and has since been a target for an ongoing feud with the rival Oregon State University. Following suit, Eugene High School built a large "E" several hundred feet to the west in 1915.

Skinner Butte Park received much attention and construction during the 1920s, and was a focal point for the community

The largest alteration, however, occurred when EWB commissioned the construction of a new, three million gallon reservoir in 1926. This new reservoir replaced the original masonry reservoir on the eastern summit of the butte, and eventually rendered obsolete the one million gallon reservoir that was left standing on the western summit. Even today the 1926 reservoir is still part of the City of Eugene's municipal water system.

After the passage of a $10,000 bond measure for park improvements in 1920, and with the help of various local service groups contributing labor and materials, park facilities were greatly expanded. The automobile had arrived in American culture, and brought more and more visitors to the park. The road to the top of the butte was improved, and a summit overlook developed. Many drove up the butte for a view of Eugene and the surrounding landscape, and many more joined in the recently popularized pastime of car camping in the meadow north of Skinner Butte, which was officially acquired by the City in 1928. Lamb Cottage was constructed as an open-air comfort station to serve the campers, and a small general store opened for business along Cheshire Street. Hot summer days drew crowds of locals to the banks of the Willamette at what had become the favorite swimming hole. The swimming area included a bath house, docks and water wheels, while life guards kept watch. Residents also used the new picnic and playground facilities, or played baseball on the old diamond near the river. The park even offered a small zoo exhibit with a variety of local animals such as bears, raccoons, skunks and birds, as well as exotic animals like monkeys.

One ambitions outgrowth of this attention occurred in 1928, during the height of Skinner Butte Park's heyday, through the commissioning of a master plan by a landscape architect from Portland. The plan showed a grand staircase and promenade from the end of Willamette Street, across the railroad tracks and straight up the south side of Skinner Butte to the summit, where a pergola and rows of trees framed a graceful automobile plaza crowned by a lighthouse tower. The promenade continued down the north side of the butte through terraced gardens and ended in an ornate pavilion and pool extending to the banks of the Willamette River. Less than one year later, the stock market crash of 1929 and the beginning of the depression erased whatever hopes may have existed for realizing this elaborate vision. Earlier park developments that the 1928 plan sought to emphasize, including

Camp Skinner, shown here in 1933, brought a new wave of civic improvements to the park

a modest path leading from the train station to the summit, and a few trails through the forest on the north side of the butte, are all that would be realized.

The Depression

As the economy collapsed, interest in improving the park flagged until the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established a regional base in Skinner Butte Park in 1933. Dubbed "Camp Skinner," this extensive facility was located in the former car camping and picnic area, and served as a hub for the regional efforts of the CCC as well as office headquarters for the Work Progress Administration (WPA) and the National Youth Administration (NYA). Some of Camp Skinner's buildings are still in use today near Cheshire Avenue and Lincoln Street. Along with many other projects around the Eugene area, the CCC undertook the construction of the basalt retaining walls and stairways on the north side of Skinner Butte, and cleared picnic areas. Although the camp closed less than a year later, transient workers for the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) moved into the vacated buildings and continued the park improvement work. The old stone fireplace that still stands at the northeast foot of the butte is testimony to their work, along with other road building and landscaping projects.

As another symptom of a growing, industrialized society, the Willamette River was closed to swimming in the 1930s. The water quality had become so poor from upstream sewage and industrial pollutants that it was deemed unfit for human contact. The old swimming hole was vacated and the bath house, docks and other structures removed.

Another beautification effort was undertaken on Armistice Day in 1934 to plant trees on the butte. A 24-foot high wooden cross, outlined in red neon, was also erected on the top of the butte in 1936, setting the stage for a controversy that would last for decades.

Controversy had also broken out over the marker commemorating the original location of Eugene Skinner's cabin that had been placed by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1906 on Second Avenue at the alley between Lincoln Street and Lawrence Street. Phoebe Skinner Kinsley, daughter of Eugene and Mary Skinner, was born in the cabin in 1850. She had become convinced that the original marker was placed in the wrong location, and initiated an effort to place a new marker across from the old quarry site. In 1930, Phoebe and the DAR placed the new marker. Today, this marker has been retired to the Lane County Historical Museum for safekeeping, and has been replaced by a new one constructed with the help of the Eugene Rotary Club. The debate continues, however, as to the exact location of the original cabin.

The Local Parks Revolution

The 1940s saw the beginning of renewed enthusiasm for park improvements. Fred Lamb, the parks superintendent in the early 1940s, oversaw the clearing of more picnic

Once a major community swimming area, the Willamette River in Skinner Butte Park was closed to swimming in the 1930s due to pollution

areas north of the butte. The open-air comfort station built for the car camp of the 1920s was renamed Lamb Cottage in his honor. Also, around 1945, temporary housing was built in the area of Lincoln Street and Cheshire Avenue for veterans returning from World War II. Some of these structures were later converted into city offices, and today house the City of Eugene Facility Management Division.

Many improvements in Skinner Butte Park were funded by bond levies over several decades

Year-round, citywide recreation activities began seriously in 1946 with the hiring of Don January as the new full-time parks superintendent. Through a cooperative effort with local and regional government and citizens groups, plans and programming were developed for many major parks in the city parks system, and were supported by an enthusiastic community through donations of time and materials. In 1948 a $2 million tax levy was passed by the voters for parks. This levy helped to fund, among other projects, the construction of an underground irrigation system, lawns, playground equipment and picnic facilities in Skinner Butte Park.

Shortly thereafter, in 1951, another $1 million dollar levy was passed. During the next decade, W. Riley (Tex) Matsler, the new parks superintendent, oversaw further improvements funded in part through this levy. Skinner Butte Park received two new picnic areas, remodeling of Lamb Cottage, reconstruction of roads and sidewalks, repair and new construction of zoo facilities, parking areas and more lawn. The overlook on top of the butte was also reconstructed, and remains much the same today. Also, in 1955, reports also indicate that property was purchased to expand Skinner Butte Park in an area north of Cheshire Avenue and east of Lincoln Street.

This trend of incremental improvements was continued into the 1960s with the passage of yet another bond levy in 1961. In 1967, major improvements were undertaken in the heart of the park near Cheshire and Lincoln, including the development of a new playground, restroom and path system. This development remains largely unchanged today.

Also during this time, the remnants of buildings associated with metal forge used by the NYA during the Camp Skinner days were converted to a park maintenance shop and headquarters near Lincoln Street and First Avenue (an area known as "Lincoln Yard"). Other warehouse buildings were moved into the Lincoln Yard area from east of Lamb Cottage and elsewhere. Today these buildings are still used as storage and offices for a special unit of the Eugene Police Department.

In 1967, a citizen committee dubbed the "Metropolitan Civic Club" conducted a major research and planning effort for Skinner Butte. This planning effort stemmed from recent, dramatic changes around the butte, and resulted in the largest public involvement effort that had been undertaken up to that time. A host of grand ideas were put forward at this time, in addition to a clear set of guidelines and recommendations for the butte. This planning effort did not include the entire park, but limited its focus to Skinner Butte itself. Although this effort probably catalyzed subsequent interest in the park, funding to implement the recommendations visions never materialized.

An Environmental Awakening

Around the 1970s, a shift in thinking began to make its way into the planning and development of Skinner Butte Park. This shift had already begun in the late 1960s, and is evidenced by the guidelines and recommendations of the Metropolitan Civic Club planning effort that seem to show a community preference for values of natural beauty and passive recreation. An awakening environmental ethic and an awareness of dramatic changes in the park (e.g. invasive plant species, river health and erosion) built on the earliest ideas of Skinner Butte Park as a place of "natural beauty," and began to favor a more subtle and restorative approach to park development.

When the I-105 freeway was constructed in 1962, the hydrology of the Willamette River was irrevocably changed. Reinforced banks supporting the freeway on the north side of the river narrowed the river channel along the west end of Skinner Butte Park, inevitably increasing the velocity of the river and directing its flow slightly more to the south. Over the next decade, major erosion events began to eat away the high bank along the park edge, toppling mammoth cottonwoods and carrying away thousands of cubic yards of soil. By the early 1970s, the park had lost fifteen feet of land in some areas along this edge. In 1975, wire baskets filled with stone were installed along the park to help stabilize the bank and reduce further erosion. Today, over twenty five years later, the gabions are beginning to fail and the erosion problem is in need of a long-term solution.

In the early 1970s, the Willamette Greenway program, designed to protect large areas of land along the Willamette River for public access, recreation and wildlife habitat, precipitated a series of major land acquisitions and master planning that would link Skinner Butte Park with a chain of other city parks up and down the river. The bike path was to be the thread that linked them. In 1973, the first gravel-surface bike path was established through the park. The path was improved two years later, and completed in its current alignment with a concrete surface 1977. As the city's most popular alternative transportation arterial, the bike path is used by bicyclists (including many commuters), rollerbladers, joggers, walkers and many others, and is one of Eugene's most important recreational features.

With this development, the focus of access and enjoyment of the park began to shift away from the automobile. Although most visitors today still arrive in the park by car, almost 90% of park visitors report using the bike path. Today's planning policy and urban design standards are reinforcing this trend towards less dependence on the automobile and more emphasis on alternative transportation.

This sketch, from the early 1970s shows a cross section of the current river banks stabilization methods used in the park

Also in the 1970s, pressure from the public led to the closure of the small zoo that had existed in the park for over fifty years. People lobbied the council for its removal, citing inhumane living conditions of the bears, birds and the lone monkey, "Fang," that lived there. In 1972, the last bird cages were finally removed.

Around 1973, the Eugene Jaycees rallied the community behind another improvement effort for the butte, and pledged to match $5,000 in fundraising. The City Council matched the money, and the "Beautify the Butte" effort was launched and successfully promoted by the Jaycees. Many organizations were involved in the effort, including the Active 20-30 Club, the American Legion, Kiwanis, Rotary, and the US Marine Corps Reserve. The main thrust of the effort, as it turned out, was to remove the 1906 reservoir from the summit of the butte. Following the drafting of an improvement plan for the butte summit as a passive recreation area, the reservoir was finally dynamited into history. Concrete remnants of the reservoir can still be found today scattered across the south slope of the butte.

Perhaps as another outgrowth of the "Beautify the Butte" campaign, an effort was undertaken to plant wildflowers on the butte, and for the first time native plant communities were closely examined in a context of park management and development. At the request of the parks department, Rhoda Love developed an inventory of plant species in three separate

categories of plant communities on Skinner Butte. In her report, she highlighted the tremendous threat that English ivy and other invasive plant species had begun to pose to the native plant communities, and recommended that these invasive species be "removed or drastically controlled."

The site's cultural history experienced a revival in the early 1970s when volunteers and donors sponsored the construction of a replica of Skinner's Cabin. The cabin was presented to the city in a celebration of history, and took its place at the northern foot of Skinner Butte. The original cabin location, while not exacly known, was outside of park property and had been long since developed. By 1996, it became apparent that the cabin would not withstand the damp, shady conditions on the north side of the butte for much longer, and it was restored and moved to a new, sunnier location near the playground and restroom and closer to where Skinner may have originally built his cabin. Once again, volunteers and community sponsors such as the Applegate Trail Committee, helped restore the cabin and add an interpretive kiosk, and it was rededicated with another celebration of history. Today, the cabin replica is a popular attraction for history enthusiasts and followers of the Applegate Trail.

The Modern Era

After decades of more or less continual improvement and expansion, Skinner Butte Park saw relatively few projects in the 1980s and 1990s. This is mostly due to a dramatic decline in funding to support park development and maintenance that marked these years. Aside from extensive volunteer projects undertaken by the Eugene Rotary club on Skinner Butte in the late 1990s, most of the recreational facilities remained unchanged throughout this period.

Traffic issues became more of a concern within the park in the 1980s. Following a study that documented high speed and traffic volumes along Cheshire Avenue, a traffic diverter was installed to help slow things down. Although the diverter did reduce traffic, it funneled traffic through a parking lot frequented by children visiting the playground. After a few years, the diverter was removed due to safety concerns.

Partly in response to neighborhood concerns about high traffic flow on Jefferson Street, a proposal was drafted later in the 1980s to connect Cheshire Avenue to Jefferson Street and Owen Rose Garden under the existing I-105 underpass. A block of land north of Cheshire and east of Lincoln was acquired and several homes were cleared in anticipation of constructing the extension. The plans for the connector, however, were rejected by the Whiteaker neighborhood and subsequently abandoned.

The debate over the large cross that had been present on Skinner Butte since the 1930s, having come to a head some thirty years previous, flared up again in the 1990s. In 1962, the second wooden cross to adorn the butte blew down in the Columbus Day storm. Debate raged within the community over whether or not to replace it. In the middle of the night in 1963, a large, concrete cross appeared mysteriously on the butte. After much debate and a showing of support from the community, the cross was legitimized by action of the City Council. The battle continued in the courts for decades, and in 1997, the cross was finally removed by legal order. Two years later, through generous community donations and volunteer efforts, a large American flag and overlook was constructed in place of the cross as a legally-sanctioned veteran's memorial.

In the 1980s, plans called for a connection to Owen Rose Garden by extending Cheshire Avenue under I-105 to Jefferson Street